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Constructing catalan identities: Remembering and forgetting in Montserrat Roig's La veu melodiosa
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CONSTRUCTING CATALAN IDENTITIES:
REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING
IN MONTSERRAT ROIG'S
LA VEU MELODIOSA

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In Montserrat Roig's fictional depictions of Barcelona after the Spanish Civil War, suppressing the past and creating an alternative to reality is essential to the survival of many characters. Those who lived through the war recreate or reinterpret aspects of culture, historical events, and personal experiences in expressions of Catalan nationalism that the texts often question. Extreme consequences result when figures from this older generation in *El temps de les cireres* (1977), *L'òpera quotidiana* (1982), and *La veu melodiosa* (1987) selectively combine fantasy and «actual» events; their connections to the present break down and the imaginary frequently takes control of their lives.

In contrast, many of Roig's younger protagonists are political activists who idealize their activities and later forget or ignore the unpleasant uncomfortable aspects of what they have done.¹ One of the principal narrators in Roig's last novel, *La veu melodiosa*, is a woman in her forties who finds that she is unable to repress the truth about the past any longer. Rather than engage in the fantasizing of her older counterparts, she employs her memories to compose an accurate record of past events. The self-conscious written account that results from her efforts constitutes much of this novel.

Following a long period of silence and isolation after her student activism of the 1960s, Virgínia (the narrator) writes from her

¹ Mari Cruz, the young maid in *L'òpera quotidiana*, is an exception. She is a member of the working class, rather than a student. After spending most of her time with two older characters —Horaci Duc and the senyora Altafulla— who indulge in such imagining, she is ultimately drawn into the same type of existence.

house, where she has been shut up in order to avoid contact with the world. The principal focus within Virgínia's narrative is the life of her friend, l'Espardenya, Virgínia's own need to confront the past motivates her narration of the events from their university days that eventually force l'Espardenya to take stock of his life.

Although the narrator realizes that nothing can be done to change the past, the possibility of coming to terms with it and moving ahead leads *La veu melodiosa* to close on a more positive and hopeful note than Roig's earlier fiction. Unlike the older protagonists in *L'òpera quotidiana*, Virgínia professes some faith in the power of words to affect her present existence positively. Issues surrounding memories and history are treated at a number of levels throughout the novel.

For this younger narrator, remembering has the affirmative associations found in what David Herzberger defines as the postwar novel of memory. In «Narrating the Past: History and the Novel of Memory in Postwar Spain» he describes the following relationship between the protagonist and history in these novels:

the novel of memory portrays the individual self (most frequently, but not exclusively, through first-person narration) seeking definition by commingling the past and present in the process of remembering. This process may be activated either voluntarily or involuntarily, but it turns consistently on a bimodal correlation: the self in search of definition; the definition of self perceived always within the flow of history (37).

Virgínia, however, does not conceive of her attempt to compose an account of this period solely as a personal inquiry. Part of her aim is to reach an understanding of what happened to «us» —the members of her university group who were involved in opposing the Franco regime. The highly critical picture Virgínia offers of herself and the others, as well as her probing approach, lends credibility to her interpretation of these past events.

Much of the material pertaining to l'Espardenya appears in a section of the novel narrated by an unidentified voice. It describes how an extremely programmed intellectual Catalan upbringing is

imposed upon l'Espardenya by his grandfather, one of Roig's older, «fantasizing» protagonists. The senyor Malagelada's aim is to mold l'Espardenya according to the norms of a previous epoch. I am particularly interested in how these actions on behalf of l'Espardenya actually respond to his own need to escape from the present and fashion a less painful version of the past.

Following the boy's birth, his grandfather attempts to create a paradise for him that will serve as an alternative to the reality of Barcelona just after the war. The old man isolates the boy and himself from the outside world as much as possible. Time has stopped in their dark and quiet apartment, which is referred to by l'Espardenya's university friends as a museum. This space, where contact with current events is forbidden, is almost all the boy knows of the world until he is sixteen. The senyor Malagelada believes that his grandson needs protection not only from external elements, but from himself as well. Until he is an adolescent, l'Espardenya is prevented from seeing his reflection in a mirror because he is extremely unattractive.

In his harmonious creation, the senyor Malagelada decrees that only melodious voices are to be heard. Carefully selected teachers are instructed to expose l'Espardenya to ideas and knowledge according to the old man's very specific guidelines. His circle of friends from before the war has almost disappeared; some were killed, others exiled, and many who remain have ceased to engage in their previous artistic pursuits. The old man's patronage on behalf of his grandson's education is the only source of income for a number of the intellectuals who find employment in the Malagelada household.

Before this structured programa is put in place, the housekeeper, Leticia/Dolors, is allowed to provide l'Espardenya with some sense of a nonintellectual tradition through old Catalan songs and *romanços*, fairy tales, and Bible stories.² Leticia/Dolor's folkloric teachings save

² At the opening and close of the novel, this character is referred to as Dolors. During most of l'Espardenya's childhood, however, she is known as Leticia. The grandfather orders this change «[p]erquè Leticia vol dir alegria, «unlike her given name, which is among «els noms que anuncien sofriment» (21).

the boy from a completely arid childhood of books and learning, in addition to offering him the chance to use his imagination. He learns such Catalan classics as «La dama d'Aragó» and the story of the Comte Arnau from her. When he is in jail at the end of the novel, l'Espardenya looks back on what she taught him with great appreciation because it proves to be much more meaningful than all the ideas to which his instructors introduced him.

The conservation of the boy's Catalan identity is to be achieved by providing him with extensive knowledge of the classic literature of his homeland. The great importance attached to this aspect of his education explains in part why it must take place in such clandestinity in the period immediately following the war; all vestiges of Catalan independence were suppressed at that time. One of l'Espardenya's instructors challenges this system of keeping him totally isolated and reminds the old gentleman that he is not God. In defense of what he has done, the latter explains that if he had let l'Espardenya be educated outside the house, «[l]i haurien ensenyat a ser hipòcrita, i feble. Li haurien traspassat l'esperit dels derrotats, dels que s'han deixat sotmetre» (43).

L'Espardenya's experiences with the police and being in jail during his college years demonstrate, however, that the old man is deluded about his ability to protect his grandson in this artificial environment. They are a graphic illustration of the impossibility of truly sheltering him from evil and oppression, which are part of life. Moreover, l'Espardenya discovers that the potential for doing evil exists even in those he considers to be his friends; it is not confined to any one group, such as the «winners» of the war. After l'Espardenya is severely beaten by the police, he gives them names that lead to more student arrests. Although none of his friends or other politically active classmates suffers such treatment, they label l'Espardenya a coward and completely ostracize him as a result.

Concerns about being one of the «defeated» are a constant theme in Roig's fiction.³ They are featured in *El temps de les cireres*, the

³ Indeed, the opposition of *vencidos* and *vencedores* is found in much postwar

second novel in her trilogy based on the Miralpeix and Claret families, principally in the character of Joan Miralpeix, the incarnation of such a defeated product of the war. After three years in a concentration camp, he sees no option but to accept the new imposed order: «Calia regirar el pensament, calia començar a parlar d'una altra manera, vestir-se com ells volien, tancar-se a casa, dormir, ferhi una llarga i compacta dormida, calia no sortir al carrer, car el carrer era d'ells (142-143).

Miralpeix devotes himself to making money as the only way of both escaping reality and avenging in a small way what has been done to him by those who won the war. He resents his daughter's involvement in politics because it reminds him of the past, which he refuses to revisit: «Però ell no hi tornaria, a tot això, ho tenia ben colgat al fons del seu cos» (142). At this point in his life, Miralpeix chooses to avoid painful aspects of the past rather than invent a more attractive version to take its place.

The protagonists of *L'òpera quotidiana*, however, prefer to base their present existence on highly questionable accounts of prior events. The senyora Altafulla, an aging opera enthusiast, argues that daily survival after the war required a certain type of «acting»: «Calia representar dalt del teu escenari una comèdia callada, sotmesa, on podies interpretar tots els papers dramàtics menys un, el de l'ésser que pensa i que participa dins de la vida col·lectiva» (164). When the need for such charades no longer exists, the old woman still remains planted in a world of her own making, which is based on romantic novels and operas.

Horaci Duc, another of the novel's central characters, customizes different versions of his life to suit his listeners. While recounting his younger years, Duc explains how he too isolated himself as

fiction. Of particular relevance to Roig's work is the discussion of this topic in Geraldine C. Nichols' *Escribir, espacio propio: Laforet, Matute, Moix, Tusquets, Riera y Roig por sí mismas* (Minneapolis: Institute for the Study of Ideologies and Literature, 1989). See especially the introduction and the interview with Roig in chapter five.

much as possible, in order to avoid the oppressive atmosphere of postwar Barcelona. When Duc and his new wife were at home, he felt «[c]om si no hi hagués hagut una guerra, com si no hi hagues-sin derrotats» (65). The senyor Malagelada attempts to provide a similar escape for his grandson.

Duc and Miralpeix are among those protagonists in Roig's fiction who assume their defeat as an essential part of their identity because they are unable to resist subjugation by the new authorities. Miralpeix's daughter judges her father to be a «còrd» —the same word Horaci's wife uses to describe him when he refuses to distribute political pamphlets in *L'òpera quotidiana*. Although the political situation is these men's primary excuse for what they have become, the novels reveal that a variety of other causes play a part as well.⁴ Later in *La veu melodiosa*, the reader also discovers that the grandfather's behavior is not solely governed by these political circumstances and his interest in the Catalan cause either.

As the result of the war's outcome and his personal experience, the grandfather in *La veu melodiosa* prefers books to people because written works are incapable of betrayal. Towards the end of the novel, l'Espardenya reflects on a related aspect of his grandfather's approach to life: «L'avi havia volgut posar en ordre el caos de la vida com si fos una novel·la» (145). The senyor Malagelada's view of history is of a similar orderly nature; it follows the traditional orientation that Roig consistently undermines and challenges in her writing. When one of his grandson's instructors is explaining the French revolution in an unorthodox manner, recounting events of the time from a social perspective, the old man objects, declaring simply that «[l]a història, cal explicar-la a través dels grans fets» (40).

The type of events that the narrators recount in *La veu melodio-*

⁴ Once his wife has died, Miralpeix engages in such bizarre behavior that his son commits him to a mental hospital. Although he has accepted a number of other losses since the war's end, Miralpeix is unable to accept losing her. Thus, like the senyora Altafulla, he ends his life isolated from society because his fantasies have exceeded the acceptable limits.

sa contributes to a deconstruction of such a view of history. Incidents that seem to have little significance on the surface, such as the students' May Day outing, have a great deal of influence on the course of the characters' lives. In a jab at «History» that is typical of Roig, the narrator in the chapter observes that people insisted that as the war was coming to an end, placards appeared in the Rambla and the Plaça de Catalunya proclaiming there would be peace. S/he explains in an ironic tone, however, that historians have since corrected this unsuitable and incorrect version of the past: «...però ara els historiadors diuen que els cartells i les pissarres no van existir mai» (12). Undoubtedly, despite these pronouncements of the «truth», for the people who read them, the placards have not moved into the realm of the fantastic and continue to exist in their memories.

In both her fictional and nonfictional works, Roig consistently rejects the traditional position that the official or «true» record of events emanates from a special group assigned the task of formulating that record. In such accounts, little attention or credit is given to the daily activities that compose people's lives. The alternative Roig offers cannot be characterized solely as a reaction against the historiography of the Franco period, such as that identified by Herzberger in his novels of memory. Rather, Roig's objections to this traditional concept of history have other ramifications because they respond to both her feminist and Catalanist concerns.

In a study of female Catalan authors of this century, Anne Charlon notes their general tendency to record «la història de les cases i les llegendes familiars» (206). In the more contemporary authors, she recognizes an additional need to recuperate the smaller scale elements of a suppressed past. In novels of memory, attempts are made to arrive at a more authentic vision of the past that includes the individual and offers an alternative to the version produced by and for the regime. However, the blanket omission of large pieces of Catalonia's past in a wide range of areas imposes an even more pressing task on Roig.

A Catalan response to the distortion that characterized the sta-

te's treatment of Spanish history requires recuperating elements of the region's past. The Catalan language, as well as much of its literature and history, which were officially prohibited during a significant period following the war, constituted a way of life that could only be kept alive clandestinely. As a result, any «reconstrucció de la identitat catalana» as described by Charlon (205) first requires the recovery of numerous missing pieces.

Roig recognizes, however, that this enterprise is not without its pitfalls. She rejects attempts to overcompensate for the silence of the postwar by casting all of Catalonia's past in a favorable light. For a number of the characters, this lack of a critical sense, which leads to the evocation of a Catalan past of mythic proportions, has serious consequences. In addition, the desire to demonstrate «proper» patriotic sentiment can lead characters to misrepresent their actions and those of others. The pathetic and lonely end of Horaci Duc and the senyora Altafulla in *L'òpera quotidiana*, as well as that of the senyor Malagelada and other figures in *La veu melodiosa*, demonstrates the dangers involved in losing touch with reality.

Not only is the grandfather's idealized version of the Catalan past questioned in *La veu melodiosa*, but the image that l'Espardenya's young radical friends construct of themselves, their beliefs, and future political accomplishments is treated critically as well. The ease with which the events following their encounter with the police shatter this image demonstrates its fragility. Nobody is immune to this tendency to idealize, least of all members of Roig's generation. *La veu melodiosa* was written when the Spanish transition to democracy had been going on for a decade. The criticism of Roig's generation here reflects concern that accounts of political opposition to the Franco regime not take on a mythic quality that would move those years into the realm of fantasy.

The young people in the novel primarily respect rationalism and theoretical tracts, disdaining any expression of sentiments. With few exceptions, quantitative data hold the most interest for them because «...tot havia de tenir una explicació» (96). L'Espardenya's inclination to express and discuss emotions clashes with his friends' posi-

tion. Being sentimental or *cursi* is considered the worst possible accusation the group can make against any individual. They concede little importance to emotional relationships, including those involving sex.

While writing the text, Virgínia identifies herself as an «impositora» whose actions were typical of the group in those days. Despite their conviction that they are free and not tied down by the traditional roles of society, these young people have merely traded one set of standards for another. As «les dones noves» (82), the female students find prescriptions for the proper attitudes toward men and sex in Simone de Beauvoir's writings, while their male counterparts read Sartre or Camus. Although they see their behavior as a more honest alternative to the social norms of the time, it serves only to bring them unhappiness, which is apparent despite attempts to conceal their feelings from each other.

The absence of any genuine quality in the conduct of these «revolutionaries» is not limited to their personal relationships. The persistent irony in Virgínia's contrasting observations of the group's concerns and those of l'Espardenya constantly points to an inauthenticity in what they do. Frequently, a simple juxtaposition of their activities results in a strong condemnation of herself and the rest of them.

The radicals spend their time reading and discussing theoretical tracts while l'Espardenya is not only teaching a group of displaced poor people to read, but trying to understand how they feel and share their experiences. Joan Lluís dismisses his actions as those of «un sant laic» (94) who indulges himself in charity work. Despite her purported political commitment, after seeing how these unfortunate people live, Virgínia is greatly relieved not to be one of them. She recognizes that l'Espardenya gets so close to them because his feelings, rather than political or economic theories, guide his actions. Virgínia also suggests that l'Espardenya is the one of the group who has some sense of why he agrees to participate in the May Day activities, unlike the others who are primarily motivated by the need to prove that they are not afraid.

The greatest irony of *La veu melodiosa* is that l'Espardenya is beaten and tortured by the police, although he has never participated in any of the group's political activities before. Once in jail, l'Espardenya is the only student tortured because the police believe that he is a communist who attempted to stir up trouble among the displaced people. The «real» communists had not engaged in any activities of this kind, which might have implicated them as well. All their theoretical discussions and circulating of leaflets are ignored by authorities because they are judged not to be threatening.

This younger generation, with the exception of l'Espardenya, relies on a conscious «forgetting» of events in order to confront reality. For Joan Lluís and Mundeta, only by separating themselves from the trauma of what happened on May Day are they able to move forward with their lives.

Virginia describes Mundeta's forgetting as a process that begins once the police have appeared and continues gradually throughout the incident: «A cada pas, una mica d'oblit» (112). A short time later, Virginia and the others no longer remember l'Espardenya's name: «Havíem oblidat el seu nom. Ho volíem així: volíem perdre la memòria» (87).

During their prison stay, Joan Lluís' response to l'Espardenya's effort to make him talk about his past is emblematic of this need to forget: «Recordar és una feblesa» (131). Undoubtedly, a connection between memories and the recognition of feelings—which are scorned by these «revolutionaries»—is behind this hostile attitude.

The problematic nature of the past makes forgetting a fundamental activity for most of the characters in this novel, regardless of their age. During l'Espardenya's childhood, forgetting plays an important part in his grandfather's plan to expunge offensive elements from his surroundings. Only approved historical accounts are deemed acceptable and necessary. The housekeeper, Letícia/Dolors, is instructed to engage in selective remembering in order to tell l'Espardenya nothing but good things about her past. She transmits such a convincing picture of her previous idyllic country life to him, after editing out all the negative details, that even she believes it.

The boy's instructors are not to refer to any negative events of the war in his presence either.

In a discussion with another author about their generation's relationship with its past, Roig insists on the importance of remembering in order to move ahead: «[f]ins que no assumim la totalitat —les parts tèrboles i les parts extraordinàries de la nostra història passada—, no podrem reconstruir res» (Simó 75). This conviction is reflected in her treatment of history and memories in the novels considered here, as well as in her essays. Alex Broch, in *Literatura catalana: Balanç de futur*, suggests that such concerns about the need for reevaluation and renovation are generalized among Catalan intellectuals in the early 1980s: «a Catalunya s'estan destruint mites heretats per la història immediata i s'està en camí i en la necessitat de construir-ne de nous» (228).

At the end of *La veu melodiosa*, Virgínia anticipates the future because she has successfully confronted her past. The existence of this text is evidence of Virgínia's inability to forget, despite her efforts to do so. The critical examination of herself and her contemporaries that takes place in *La veu melodiosa* is possible only through the telling of l'Espardenya's story, which is also their story. This process has a therapeutic effect on the narrator, apparent both in her reflections at different points in the narrative and in the hopeful note with which she closes it. Virgínia manages to escape both the tendency of the old, like l'Espardenya's grandfather, to fantasize and the younger protagonists' rejection of anything that threatens an unequivocal affirmation of their past. In this respect, she is exceptional among the protagonists in Roig's longer fiction.

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